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The Philby Conspiracy

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INSTALLMENT X

The "Albanian massacre" was an operation originally started by the SIS in 1946 which became a joint SIS-CIA affair in 1949. Philby was associated with it from the beginning and at its bloodiest was co-director. It cost the lives of at least 300 men and for 17 years has remained one of the most carefully concealed secrets of the Cold War. It has suited both sides to leave it that way. For the West, the Albanian affair was a humiliating operational disaster. For the Russians; it was an operational triumph, but not one to shout about. Spreading throughout the uneasy Soviet empire the news of western willingness to back subversion movements in Eastern Europe might give all sorts of people the wrong idea.

The theory behind the operation was simple. The Communist regime in Albania was not firmly established. In an area of Central Albania, known as the Mati, a part of the country traditionally loyal to the king, there was a small core of royalists ready to be the basis of a resistance movement. The original plan was that, if Britain could parachute enough well-trained agents into the Mati, they could organize a maquis-style operation which the British would then supply by air drops. If the movement showed strength the people would join it. In time a full-scale civil war could be provoked. The trouble that this

would cause the Russians would alone be sufficient justification for the operation. But what if the anti-Communist revolt in Albania sparked off others throughout the Balkans? The whole basis of the Russian satellite empire could be shattered by an uprising that had had its birth in one small guerrilla operation.

THE PROJECT appeared so attractive that SIS had no hesitation in putting it into operation under Philby's control. There was no scarcity of suitable guerrilla recruits — the displaced persons camps in Greece and Italy were full of anti-Communist Albanians — and as a pilot project 12 were recruited and taken to Malta for training. The SIS instructed them in the use of weapons, codes and radio, the techniques of sabotage and subversion, and finally how to make a parachute jump. They were dropped into the mountains of the Mati throughout 1947. Results were disappointing. The inhabitants, a tough clannish community of Roman Catholics called the Malesori, were unimpressed by the arrival of a handful of agents offering to lead them in revolt. Although independent and warlike they had a peasant's faith in numbers and the type of warfare the agents tried to teach them — hit-and-run attacks on police posts, sabotage and terrorism — struck them as unmanly.

The operation dragged on in an inconclusive manner until 1945. Then the Americans, weighing up the political situation, decided to lend a hand. A joint CIA-SIS operation could step up Albanian subversion to a point where the Russians would be forced either to withdraw or to suppress the revolt with a ruthlessness that would disenchant every Iron Curtain country.

BRITAIN'S Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, was adamantly opposed to the idea. But the Foreign Office contained a vocal militant faction in favor of establishing resistance movements in virtually every country in Eastern Europe. The issue was swung by the hawks in the American State Department who saw this as a chance to remodel the face of Europe in a more sympathetic image. Bevin was persuaded to sanction another pilot operation. The Americans appointed one of their best CIA agents to act as joint controller of the operation, a man who now calls himself Christopher Felix. The British representative was their CIA liaison man, Kim Philby.

This time a better class of Albanian agent was wanted, so an approach was made to King Zog, in exile in Cairo to recommend a man for the job. Zog had no hesitation in offering his entire Royal Guard. Some declined the opportunity but most accepted, including Capt. Zenel Shehu, operator. The Albanian militia

leader of the operation, Capt. Naliti Sufa, and Hamit Matjani, an agent who had been into Albania seven times since 1946. Matjani (known as "the tiger") had been one of the leaders of the anti-Nazi resistance and his courage and ferocity were legendary. Shehu and Sufa had followed Zog into exile and had sworn they would see him restored to his throne.

These three gradually gathered together a small army, mainly by setting up a "Committee of Free Albanians" in Italy, Egypt and Greece as a front for recruiting agency. Training took place in Cyprus, the nearest firm Western foothold to Albania and where the SIS had a radio station for monitoring broadcasts from behind the Iron Curtain. It was long and thorough and the first of the guerrilla group did not drop into Albania until the spring of 1950.

THE FIRST OF the Albanian agents to land in his harsh homeland was a tough, taciturn peasant, now living in the West. He still feels bitter about the operation. "I parachuted into the Mati in 1950, and soon after Ihsan Toptani, of the king's bodyguard, joined me. Others came to join us. Some across the frontier and some by sea. But the ones who came by sea never found us. They landed and the police were always there."

For two years the first landings, small groups left regularly from training camps in Cyprus, Malta and Germany, either for the parachute drop into the Albanian mountains or to filter across the Greek-Albanian border. The whole operation was a series of disasters. The Russians just seemed to know the guerrillas were coming. Month after month survivors struggled back into Greece with stories of the swift and bloody fate that had befallen their comrades.

The last operation took place a few weeks before Easter 1952. (This is a significant date. Burgess and Maclean had already defected and Philby should have been under deep suspicion. Yet neither the SIS nor the CIA saw fit to stop the Albanian operation. Or perhaps, by now, it had gone too far to stop.) In a desperate effort to discover what was going wrong, Captain Shehu parachuted into the Mati with Captain Sufa and a radio operator. The Albanian militia